

# Springhouse Ink

The most boring conversational topic one can endure is another person's recounting of a dream from the night before. Dreams are bizarre, often frightening and important solely to the dreamer. The teller's audience lapses into polite nodding, concluding the conversation with, "Very interesting. You should write that one down. Now, if you'll excuse me," and walking away.

And, yet, I will tell you my dream.

I've heard of this notion of pandemic dreams. They are vivid, often involve peril — if not terror. They relate to daytime stress and anxiety and sometimes come about through disruption of typical sleep patterns. My most vivid one so far may sound nightmarish, but it was not terrifying. Dread, sure, but dread is no foreign emotion to *Springhouse*.

I was walking the trail and a vista of a wonderful place opened up before me. I wanted to go there. I thought this place was the place I'd been looking for and it was only a few steps away and it was a happy feeling. "Here it is," I thought. "I'm going now and it will be great and all will be well again."

Not so fast. Between me and that great place there jutted four tusks from the ground, curving inward toward each other, forming a gateway. The tusks were brick red with dried blood. Beneath the earth was the owner of these tusks and this unseen beast was hungry, appetite not yet slaked by the previous pilgrims whose blood stained the ivory.

On the trail beside me was a mop bucket and a rag. I knew what had to be done. Before entering the great place, I would have to scrub those tusks white again. Running through the gate would prompt the monster to gobble me right into the earth, leaving only a fresh coating of gore on those tusks as sign I'd ever existed.

It would be laborious, tedious and treacherous because a wrong move could test the beast's patience.

Think of scrubbing a set trap. But I'd not take a step further without completing the task. I dunked the rag into the bucket's warm suds and gingerly began scrubbing.

The night did not allow my entrance into that place beyond the grisly gateway. I woke up at dawn scrubbing away at those lethal tusks.

Some might find this imagery disturbing, but my emotion was not one of fright so much as frustration. The goal was right there in front of me. I could see it, but to reach it required a daunting and humiliating effort. Delayed gratification is torturous. Please, young parents, if the kid wants to open those brightly wrapped packages on Christmas Eve instead of Christmas Day, don't mess up his sleep by saying "no."

My dream involved normal life as that just-out-of-reach great place being denied by the tusks of COVID-19. The restaurant is right there. The movie theater is right there. The friends are just over there and they are as hungry for social interaction as I am. Indulge desires for those communal activities and a two-week quarantine or hospital visit may result. Infecting our families and elders may be the result. If we must go out, we must wear a mask, must endure the stench of our own breath, the fog on glasses lenses, the claustrophobic suffocation of breathing through winter-wet nostrils instead of our wide mouths, the sensation of being asked a question and being unable to respond without mask shifting beneath the nose and having to readjust it with the hand knowing that touching the mask's exterior spreads any virus particles to your own skin and it's only a matter of time until that infected finger rubs your eye or scratches an itch at your lip and next thing you know you are in the emergency room or ICU dreaming COVID nightmares with a ventilator down your throat keeping your lungs pumping up and down. These scenarios are the

tusks. The virus is that unseen part down below the ground, ready to deposit me into the earth right along with it.

We polish away at those tusks, mask up, wash hands, social distance, but, most importantly, we don't go in buildings with other people if we don't have to. And that last one is why southern Illinois and the rest of the nation has COVID cases rising every single day. No news broadcast these days — Nov. 22 at the time of this writing — leaves out the phrase “new grim milestone.” 12.3 million cases nationwide this morning, up from 11 million a week ago. But I suffer from COVID fatigue like everybody else. The daily numbers become tiresome. I remember being alarmed when Saline County — commerce hub of southeastern Illinois — had 15 cases this spring. The number has grown to 1,120 and 24 deaths. It will be more by the time this issue arrives in mailboxes. Thirty new cases reported in a day doesn't even seem meaningful, anymore. Visiting Saline County without a very good reason doesn't seem meaningful, either.

Life is hard for rural people. A lot of people own their own businesses and that is always an unpredictable income stream. Others work for corporations where layoffs are always a possibility. The shield of the union seems reserved mainly for government employees. A lot of single moms may or may not receive child support payments. Addiction is a problem. People had a lot of stress prior to February when the pandemic reached this country. They had ways of coping with it, often involving weekend social gatherings with their circles of social support. It's understandable some are resistant to instruction to avoid social gatherings and to wear inconvenient masks. It's easier to deny the effectiveness of these inconveniences and to build wild stories to support lack of protection. We have always worn our shoulder chips proudly in this region. But the other day I saw a flag supporting the reelection of President Donald Trump and it bore a vulgar message that I have edited for civility, but that we all should pay attention to. It said “Donald Trump 2020 (Forget) Your Feelings!”

That great place in my dream may as well have been a shopping mall, a big box store, a museum, a movie theater, a restaurant, a bar, a coffee shop. These are places to be around other humans and to people watch, like being at a human zoo. It is enjoyable to see and hear other people, especially the odd conversations between young children and their parents at the grocery store.

My zoo these days involves my wife, two cats and two dogs. I get to witness my dog chewing a bone in the yard, then batting the bone about, rolling on it, walking a few steps, vomiting pieces of the bone, picking up a chunk of vomited bone, carrying it into the yard and burying it. My cat was tugging at a sheet upon which was a potted plant and I admonished her, “Stop that, you'll knock the plant over.” She looked at me, continued tugging the sheet and knocked the plant over. My

wife called in an excited state saying the heated seat in her car had caught the seat on fire, her posterior was burned and the car was filled with smoke. Yesterday the day was abuzz with phone calls from Vicky's kids, one of whom was abused by a sheep who enjoys butting her with his big head. Another had smashed a neighboring car in the parking lot with his door in the strong wind and was looking for advice. Appreciate these stimulations when you get them and be awed by the randomness of existence.

Hospitals are filling up, but, even worse, they are short-staffed because health workers are having to quarantine with COVID.

Kids can't really be learning much this year because they will be in class for a couple weeks, then doing Internet learning from home the next two because of COVID outbreaks in the schools. One student gets sick, the whole class has to stay home. One teacher gets sick, several may have to quarantine. It seems school budgets and family convenience have taken priority over human life. Sacrifices must be made.

Some people aren't attending church because they are afraid of unmasked fellow members. The place of solace and healing has become one of danger. If other members aren't attending because some believe God grants divine immunity, perhaps it's time to reassess piety.

We need to be brave and do the hard job to keep this disease from spreading.

We need to be grandmothers. In the spring and early summer when numbers were low I'd do the shopping in town. At the grocery store some people were taking the masking precautions and others ignored them. Among the grandmas in the store, 100 percent wore masks. They didn't pause in the aisles to chit chat. They got what they needed and got out. Grandmas know the meaning of family. They know the meaning of community. They know how to sacrifice for the good of the whole. We need to bear witness to our leaders in government, but we need to follow the lead of our grandmothers.

Charles Bukowski wrote the closing line in his poem “Trouble,” “The trouble with these people is that their cities have never been bombed and their mothers have never been told to shut up.”

Do like our grandmothers and learn to crochet or quilt and give these gifts through delivery services. These will be more meaningful than our presence at any holiday feast.

This column may be dark, but reflects the moment in time this fellow observes from his corner of the state. We live in dark times and winter is not yet here.

This is the 200th issue of *Springhouse*. If every issue was a penny, we'd have \$2.00. If every issue was a button, we'd have the world's largest timber rattlesnake. If every issue received support from patient readers, we'd know the effort is worth it. Readers have said it is. We thank you for that.

The adventure continues.